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NUCLEAR WASTE Yucca ruling cheers S.C. leaders

U.S. can't abandon plans
to open Nevada repository

By JAMES ROSEN
McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON — Democratic U.S. Rep. John Spratt and Republican U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson don't agree on much, but the S.C. congressmen are cheering a new ruling that denied the bid by the U.S. Energy Department to withdraw its application for a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain in Nevada.

Three administrative judges within the Nuclear Regulatory Commission ruled June 29 that Congress had designated Yucca Mountain in 1987 to receive highly toxic waste from the Savannah River Site and other complexes that built atom bombs during the Cold War.

The panel found President Barack Obama and Energy Secretary Steven Chu, a nuclear physicist, lacked the power to close the Yucca repository unilaterally. Doing so, it ruled, would require an act of Congress.



Spratt



Wilson

"Currently, South Carolina is storing 37 million gallons of liquid waste at SRS, as well as tons of used fuel rods at nuclear plants across the state that are intended to be shipped to Yucca Mountain," Spratt said. "Should Yucca Mountain not be opened, South Carolina would be stuck with this waste indefinitely."

Spratt, from York, said he will use his post as House Budget Committee

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chairman to try to restore at least some of the money cut by Obama for the Yucca repository.

Spratt and U.S. Rep. Doc Hastings, a Washington state Democrat, crafted an amendment to the 2011 defense authorization bill, reaffirming congressional commitment to the Yucca waste site. Other Democratic lawmakers, allied with Obama, prevented the House from voting on the Spratt-Hastings amendment in early June.

In March, Spratt and House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, a Democrat from Columbia, co-sponsored a resolution of disapproval condemning Obama's move to abandon Yucca. That measure has been bottled up in the House Energy and Commerce Committee, again with the help of Obama allies.

Wilson, a Republican from Springdale, said shuttering Yucca would waste years of research and money spent on environmental, engineering and safety plans for the desert site, 90 miles northwest of Las

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"Thousands of studies and billions of dollars are invested in this repository, including over \$1 billion from South Carolina," Wilson said. "If we are to be serious about an energy future in America, we must get serious about nuclear power and move forward with Yucca Mountain."

Yucca is designed to hold waste from nuclear weapons production and maintenance at SRS and similar complexes in Washington state, Idaho, Tennessee and other states.

The repository also would take less toxic – but still plenty deadly – waste from the nation's 104 commercial nuclear reactors, including seven in South Carolina and five in North Carolina.

The federal government has spent more than \$10 billion to develop the Yucca repository. That money has come from a surcharge paid by nuclear power customers, as required by the 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act.

The surcharge, which has raised \$32 billion nationwide, has hit South Carolinians especially hard because nuclear power provides 51 percent of the state's electricity, more than in all but two of the other 30 states with commercial reactors. About 31 percent of the electricity in North Carolina is nuclear-based.

After Obama moved to mothball Yucca, U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, a Republican from Seneca, introduced a bill in April 2009 to give nuclear utility consumers rebates for the Yucca surcharges that they had paid.

"The decision by the Obama administration to close Yucca Mountain was ill-advised and leaves our nation without a disposal plan spent nuclear fuel or Cold War waste," Graham said.

Senate Democratic leaders have stymied Graham's bill, which hasn't moved from the Senate Energy and Commerce Committee.

Just as they are influencing other policy battles in Washington, the November elections loom over the long-running Yucca Mountain saga.

Spratt, 67, and Wilson, 52, are both in competitive reelection campaigns in a year punctuated by many voters' anger against incumbent officeholders.

Spratt faces state Sen. Mick Mulvaney, a Republican from Indian Land, in November.

Wilson and Rob Miller, a Beaufort Democrat, are squared off in a repeat of their 2008 contest, which Wilson won by a 54 percent to 46 percent margin.

South Carolina governors and other leaders from both major parties have fought for a quarter century to gain federal assurances that SRS – located along the Georgia border in Aiken County – won't become a permanent dump for its toxic waste.

Wilson and other Republican lawmakers accused Obama of playing politics in trying to shutter Yucca.

"The president is risking the country's energy independence in an effort to help Senator Reid win a tough election," said U.S. Sen. Jim Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin, senior Republican on a House Select Committee on Energy and Global Warming.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Nevada Demo-

crat and an early supporter of Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, is struggling to keep his seat.

Recent polls show Reid trailing Sharron Angle, a former Nevada Republican assemblywoman and a Tea Party favorite, in their campaign for the November general election.

Storing the nation's most poisonous nuclear waste under a mountain near Las Vegas, Reid and most other Nevada leaders think, would threaten the city's \$28 billion gaming and broader tourism industry.

"It's closed, it's gone," Reid said of the Yucca repository after the Obama administration moved to halt the project. With the recent ruling, however, the Yucca site has new life.

Chu in January set up the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Energy Future. He directed the panel – led by former U.S. Rep. Lee Hamilton and former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft – to seek alternatives to Yucca Mountain for radioactive waste disposal.

David Jameson, head of the Greater Aiken Chamber of Commerce, criticized Chu for failing to include on the panel any leaders from the five S.C. and Georgia counties that surround SRS – or from neighbors of the nation's other major nuclear arms complexes.

"We have asked repeatedly for representation, but have been ignored," Jameson said. "The federal government has broken faith with our communities and others who were told they would be (only) temporary hosts to high-level defense waste."

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